Visual Interaction Design

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That Vision Thing

As a quarter of the new year passes, one's thoughts naturally will, on occasion, turn to a review of those pesky New Year's Resolutions: how many of them, born by the allure of a clean slate, are still being followed? One of the most common resolutions, after the standard pledge to reduce food, alcohol, and nicotine consumption, seems to be the vow to lead a more organized and purposeful life. The inviting structure of a blank, new calendar stimulates the urge to finally get a grip and to start doing things "right."

In true capitalistic fashion, striving to profit from every conceivable need, planning has become a commodity. Numerous "systems" propose to help individuals better manage their time and thus their aspirations. Countless books cover topics ranging from organization to daily meditation as a means of achieving lifetime goals. Industry has business plans; academia has charters. Across all these approaches, a key concept appears: the mission statement, a vision, some declaration of intentions and direction. The concept has been both lauded and mocked. While Fortune 500 CEOs credit their success to a clear vision of what the company should be and where it should go, web page critics devote entire sections of their books to dissuading designers from inflicting a company's detailed, karmic, political, and worst of all *obvious* mission statement ("We aspire to be the best!") onto the rest of society (Flanders and Willis, 1998).

What it seems to come down to is this: having a clear statement of purpose can't guarantee success, but it can greatly leverage your efforts so that whatever activities you engage in, they bring you closer to where you truly want to be. While it's possible to survive in a making-it-up-as-you-go mode, definite goals can serve as an ultimate arbitrator, guiding difficult decisions regarding which options to take and which avenues to follow. Rather than following the path of least resistance, which has been defined by someone else, you get to set the agenda.

However, vision alone is not a panacea. Developing a vision and following through on it are two different tasks, requiring greatly different levels of effort to enact. Enacting your vision (or even figuring out *how* to enact it), can make New Year's resolutions look easy in comparison. At the same time, a vision needs to be seen as a set of guidelines, rather than mandates, so that reason can play a role in any decision. There may be a good rationale for pursuing an opportunity that does not fit your vision exactly, and these should not be missed because of a rigid adherence to dogma that you created yourself.

With the above in mind, your column's co-editors have decided to articulate our vision of how we think the Visual Interaction Design Special Interest Area (VID SIA) column should develop, in terms of the audience addressed and the topics covered.

It's been six years since the column's inception, and a look back at the past can help us define where we want to go in the future. For the first four years of its existence, the column was ably helmed by Maria Wadlow. In her first VID SIA column (Wadlow, 1993), she defined the goals of the column as ... two-fold: to inform the CHI community about happenings within the field of visual interaction design; and to explore particular issues of relevance to the visual interaction design field via contributed articles by members of the community.

Maria did a superb job of meeting these goals through a combination her own essays and contributions from a variety of practitioners. These columns addressed a variety of perspectives on visual interaction design.

Since we assumed the masthead two years ago, we have followed a fairly similar approach, albeit in somewhat of a "make-it-up-as-you-go" mode. While we believe it has been successful, we thought it was time to review our goals and attempt to make some concrete plans for how to make the column even better. Besides, major changes have taken place over the past six years, in human-computer interaction as a whole and visual interaction design in particular. With these new plans, we hope to focus the issues covered in this forum and to stimulate those of you working in visual interaction design to share your thoughts and experiences.

Our goals are to provide engaging, thought-provoking essays, contributed by a variety of people (we prefer, for the most part, to be editors, not writers), about topics of immediate relevance and interest to the community. Our inclination is to lean towards ideas, criticism, and opinion, and away from the strictly "how-to"; and we are less concerned with specifically addressing the wider CHI audience and more concerned about giving the community what it wants or needs. Finally, we hope to use the column as one means of drawing the community closer together.

So how do we plan to meet these goals? We would like contributions to the column to focus on one of four areas of general interest to visual interaction designers: 1) the "bleeding

edge" 2) professional practice 3) design case studies and 4) the annual CHI conference. The idea here is to provide a framework for exploring a variety of issues associated with visual interaction design without dictating a rigid structure for what should be considered proper or relevant.

For example, topics for "bleeding edge" articles could focus on rising trends, blue sky theories from university think tanks, or novel applications of ideas from other disciplines. Topics for professional practice articles could cover anything that relates to being a practicing designer, from our role within multi-disciplinary teams, to demonstrating the value of our work. Ideas about education, tools, and processes could also live here. Design case studies could tell stories about a real development project, or could be a critique of existing products, services, and interfaces (or of the tools and heuristics used to build them). Finally, the annual CHI conference review will continue to report on the CHI conference from the eyes of a visual interaction designer. There is possible overlap here; a bleeding edge trend could be a design process, and a professional practice article could take shape as a case study. However, as we have said, the idea is to give some structure to the design space, not to make rigid categories.

To help narrow these possibilities even more, we would like to select an annual theme relevant to visual interaction design, such as The Web. So, for example, a bleeding edge article about the web might be about relationship building engines; a professional practice article might be about the trials and tribulations of collaborating long distance on the design of a web site or remote usability testing; a design case study might compare the design of amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com or survey novel information structures; and the CHI issue might include some specific reporting on web-related research, addressing both how VID and CHI in general address these issues.

The tricky part may well be selecting the themes: should it be by media format (web, cd-rom, GUI, etc.), elements of design (sound, graphics, time, etc.), design issues (navigation, structure, dialogs, etc.), or ideology (learner-centered, task-based, experience-based, etc.)? To make matters easier for ourselves, we are picking the theme of "The Web" for the next year (baby steps, the books advise!), but we look forward to some debate over the next big theme.

So that's our vision of where we'd like to see the column go, and our first plan for how to implement the vision. Like any mission statement, its value resides in how well it reflects the needs and wants of those it serves. We would like to receive comments from the VID community about how their views and missions mesh with our own. In this way, we can create both a vision and a column that addresses the widest concerns of those in the field, and, hopefully, has a better chance of being successful than the majority of New Year's resolutions.

References

Flanders, V. and Willis, M. (1998). *Web pages that suck.* San Francisco: SYBEX.

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About this Column

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Visual Interaction Design is a Special Interest Area of SIGCHI focusing on the visual aspects of interaction in interface design. The goals of the Visual Interaction Design Special Interest Area are to act as a focal point for visual interaction design interest within SIGCHI, to advance visual interaction design as an integral component of HCI, and to integrate visual interaction design with the rest of SIGCHI.

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